Dozens killed in separate Chinese mine explosions

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Dozens of coal miners were killed last week in separate accidents in China, again highlighting the dangerous conditions faced by workers in the coal mining industry. One deadly explosion occurred in the northeastern Liaoning Province on November 26 and the other a day later in the southern Guizhou Province.

The tragedy in Liaoning occurred early Wednesday morning around 2:35 a.m. when sparks caused by a minor earthquake reportedly ignited coal dust in the air, leading to an explosion that killed 26 miners and left 50 injured, some of whom are still in a grave condition. About 30 miners suffered serious burns, with four in danger of dying.

The mine is operated by Hengda, a subsidiary of the state-owned Fuxin Coal Corporation, which is no stranger to industrial accidents. Last year, eight workers were killed in a Fuxin mine following a gas leak. In 2005, a blast at another Fuxin mine killed 214 miners in one of China's worst mining accidents. The corporation is among the largest coal producers in northeast China, responsible for 1.5 million tons each year.

Liu Zhipeng, party head for Hengda, said the fire suddenly engulfed the platform, 800 meters underground, where the miners were working. "The fire had already gone out before rescuers could do anything," he stated.

Fuxin was warned last year by the State Administration of Work Safety to improve its safety conditions. Since the 2005 tragedy, however, there have been five deadly accidents at Fuxin mines, resulting in at least 277 deaths, making a mockery of the government's supposed calls for better working conditions. It is clear that the company has no interest in eliminating the hazardous coal dust in its mines, which also causes black lung, a debilitating and potentially fatal ailment.

The second accident occurred Thursday at the Songlin mine in the Guizhou town of Songhe. Reportedly, 19 miners were working underground at the time of the explosion, which killed 11. The cause is still under investigation.

The latest tragedies add to what has been another deadly year for China's coal miners. Just one month ago, on October 25, 16 miners were killed when a mine collapsed in the western Xinjiang province. On November 12, the government ended an 85-day search and confirmed the deaths of 21 missing miners following a mine collapse in the eastern Anhui province that killed 6 others. In April, 26 miners were killed in two separate accidents while another 22 workers were killed in June.

Last year, according to China's National Coal Administration, there were 1,067 deaths in the industry resulting from 604 accidents. However, the true number of deaths may be higher. Mine owners seek to cover up accidents to avoid economic losses, simply paying off family members of the deceased in return for their silence.

These fatalities are an indictment of the Beijing regime, which protects mine operators who in turn force workers to labor in unsafe conditions, all in the name of turning a higher profit. An unnamed Fuxin manager was quoted in China's official Xinhua News, bemoaning the explosion's impact on the company's bottom line: "The accident has made the [economic] situation of the corporation even worse."

The government claims that it is trying to improve the notorious lack of safety. Beijing has boasted of reducing coal mining-related deaths from 6,000 a year a decade ago. In part, the decline in deaths corresponds to the drop in demand for coal as the Chinese economy

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slows. Mining in China is still more deadly than anywhere else in the world, accounting for 33,000 deaths over the past 10 years.

Following the latest accidents, Fuxin and the government went into their usual routines, designed to deflect workers' anger over the unsafe conditions and their tragic consequences. All of Fuxin's mines were closed for what the company claimed were comprehensive safety checks.

Beijing announced on November 6 it would conduct its own investigations following the October mine collapse. The government said it would begin a four-month safety inspection of mines nationwide, beginning in December. Mining companies were required to implement their own safety examinations in November prior to the investigations. This one month window provided the companies with an opportunity to sweep the most glaring violations under the rug.

China is the world's largest producer and consumer of coal, operating some 12,000 mines while using the fuel to meet 65.7 percent of the country's energy needs. However, many coal mining centers have been hard hit by the slowing economy. Coal prices internationally are also sitting at historic lows.

As a result of this economic downturn, it is the workers who are being made to shoulder the burden. Hao Xumei, a 47-year-old coal washer from the industrial city of Jixi in the northeastern Heilongjiang Province, told the *Wall Street Journal*: "I haven't been paid in three months." No doubt, there will be increased pressure to override safety concerns.

Plans to eliminate jobs are also in the works. Beijing announced in July that it would close over 2,000 small coal mines by the end of next year, claiming that it would cut down on the number of deaths. In August, the government ordered a cut in coal production as the price per metric ton fell to 479 yuan ($77.90) compared to the 2011 price of 799 yuan ($130).

The closures are being planned despite the Beijing regime's reported concerns over the potential social upheaval that could accompany any mass job losses.

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